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COIN HOARDS

ANCIENT

The Abyan Governorate Hoard of
Late Roman *Solidi* and Aksumite Gold Coins

by

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DAVID MARTÍNEZ CHICO and ALBERTO GONZÁLEZ GARCÍA¹

[PLATES 47-48]

Introduction

In August 2018 a Saudi Arabian source provided us with photographs and some data about a small hoard of 16 late Roman *solidi* and 7 Aksumite gold coins, found on 29 July 2018 at an undetermined location in the Abyan Governorate of Yemen, north-east of the city of Aden. We do not know if the hoard was found in a container, and have no information about any archaeological context. We are reasonably sure that this group comprised only a small fraction of the original find, which was said to have contained 50-200 or more gold coins. However, we think that we record a typical sample of the original hoard, whose *post* and *ante quem termini* were probably the same as those of the analogous al-Madhāriba hoard (see below).

Catalogue

CONSTANTIUS II (AD 337-361)

- Obv.* FL IVL CONSTAN TIVS PERP AVG. Nos 1-4 and 9: pearl and rosette-diademed, draped, and cuirassed bust right; nos 5-8 and 10-11: pearl-diademed, helmeted, and cuirassed bust facing slightly right, holding spear over shoulder in right hand and shield decorated with horseman motif in left.
- Rev.* GLORIA REI PVBLICAE. Roma seated facing and Constantinopolis seated half-left, foot on prow; each holding sceptre, supporting shield between them inscribed (nos 1-4) VOT / XX / MVLT / XXX, or (nos 5-8 and 10-11) VOT / XXX / MVLT / XXXX, (no. 9) VOT / XXXX.

Antioch, AD 347-355

1. 4.4 g. SMANH - *R/C* VIII 81.
2. 4.5 g. SMANΘ - *R/C* VIII 83.
3. 4.3 g. SMANS - *R/C* VIII 83.
4. 4.4 g. SMANA - *R/C* VIII 84.

¹ Respectively, Universitat de València and Universidade de Vigo.

Antioch, AD 355-361

- 5. 4.4 g. SMANT• - *RIC* VIII 162.
- 6. 4.3 g. SMANΞ• - *RIC* VIII 162.
- 7. 4.3 g. SMANΘ• - *RIC* VIII 162.
- 8. 4.2 g. •SMANH• - *RIC* VIII 170.
- 9. 4.4 g. ANTA - *RIC* VIII 172/173 (new variant with interior loop).

Constantinople, AD 351-355

- 10. 4.3 g. CONS - *RIC* VIII 96.

Nicomedia, AD 351-355

- 11. 4.4 g. SMNP - *RIC* VIII 74.

CONSTANTIUS GALLUS, AS CAESAR (AD 351-354)

Obv. FL IVL CONSTAN TIVS PERP AVG. Bare-headed, draped and cuirassed bust right.
Rev. GLORIA REI PVBLICAE. Roma and Constantinopolis, enthroned facing, supporting between them a wreath inscribed VO / TIS / V, Roma holding spear and Constantinopolis holding sceptre while resting foot on prow.

Nicomedia, AD 351-354 AD

- 12. 4.4 g. SMNS - *RIC* VIII 75.

JOVIAN, AD 363-364

Obv. D N IOVIAN VS P F AVG. Pearl-diademed, draped and cuirassed bust right.
Rev. SECVRITA S REI PVBLICAE. Roma and Constantinopolis enthroned facing and supporting shield inscribed VOT / V / MVL-T / X.

Antioch and Sirmium, AD 363-364

- 13. 4.3 g. ANTZ - *RIC* VIII 222.
- 14. 4.4 g. SIRM~~XXXX~~ - *RIC* VIII 115.

VALENTINIAN I (AD 364-375)

Obv. D N VALENTINI ANVS P F AVG. Pearl-diademed, draped and cuirassed bust right.
Rev. RESTITVTOR REIPVBLICAE. Emperor in military dress standing facing, head right, labarum with Christogram on banner in right hand, Victory on globe in left (no. 15). Or GLORIA - R (Chi Rho) O - MANORVM. Roma and Constantinople seated front, supporting shield inscribed VOT / X / MVL / XX (no. 16).

Antioch, AD 364-367 or (no. 16) 367-375

- 15. 4.4 g. ANTA• - *RIC* IX 2a.xiii.
- 16. 4.4. g. ANOBH - *RIC* IX 16b.

KINGDOM OF AKSUM

Ebana, middle third of fifth century

- Obv.* +BAX+ACA+BAC+CIN or variant around. ‘King of the land of the Abyssinians [abbreviated]’? Crowned and draped bust right holding stick (or wheat-stalk), between two wheat-stalks, within circle.
- Rev.* EB+ANA+BAC+ACA+C (with the first cross at 12h). ‘King Ebana’. Draped bust right wearing headcloth, holding fly-whisk or stick, within circle.
17. 1.6 g. Munro-Hay 71/73; Hahn-West, p. 84.
 18. 1.5 g. Munro-Hay 71/73; Hahn-West, p. 84.
 19. 1.5 g. Munro-Hay 71/73; Hahn-West, p. 84.

Ousanas II, c. AD 490-510²

- Obv.* +OVCANAB ACIAEVC. ‘King Ousana’. Crowned and draped bust right holding rod, between two wheat-stalks, no circle.
- Rev.* +BEΔVE XAΓIC. ‘Thanks be to God’. As *obv.*, but wearing headcloth and holding fly-whisk.
20. 1.5 g. Munro-Hay 89/90; Hahn-West, p. 106.

Kaleb, c. AD 510 - late 530s.

- Obv.* XAAHBBACIAEVC or (n° 23) +++AHBBACIAEVC. ‘King Kaleb’. Crowned and draped bust right, holding spear/fly-whisk between two wheat-stalks, within circle. “KLB” monogram above.
- Rev.* VIOCΘEZENA or (n° 23) +++VIOCOIEZENA(OV). ‘Son of Thezena’. As *obv.*, but wearing headcloth and holding fly-whisk. The Z is like an S on its side. “KLB” monogram above.
21. 1.3 g. Munro-Hay 91/96; Hahn-West, pp. 106 and 108.
 22. 1.3 g. Munro-Hay 91/96; Hahn-West, pp. 106 and 108.
 23. 1.4 g. Munro-Hay 98/109; Hahn-West, pp. 108 and 110.

Commentary

The majority of the coins in the hoard (16 of 23) are Roman *solidi*, three quarters of them issued by Constantius II³ and his Caesar Constantius Gallus in 347-355, along with two pieces of Jovian (363-64) and two of Valentinian I (364-75). Nearly all are fairly worn, indicating a period of circulation prior to deposition⁴.

The massive minting of *solidi* in the 350s has been connected with the arrival of gold from a new source⁵. This was probably Arabia, whose mineral wealth during late Antiquity has been discussed⁶. Several hoards from the 350-367 period have been discovered in Egypt⁷.

² Traditionally numbered as Ousanas III. However, in Hahn-West (2016, p. 13) this king is named Ousanas II and not Ousanas III.

³ See Martínez Chico - López Sánchez 2016 for a new unpublished Roman solidus of this issue.

⁴ Depeyrot 1988 sets the life span of the solidus in 35 years.

⁵ Bland 1997, pp. 35-6.

⁶ Shahîd 1984, pp. 31-73, id. 2009, pp. 47-50; Crone 1987, pp. 93-4; Heck 2003.

⁷ Callu 1983.

All the *solidi* of this hoard came from Eastern mints⁸. This is consistent with the diplomatic activity between Rome and Aksum in the reign of Constantius II, and the commercial contacts of the Roman East with the Red Sea and India (see below). The best represented mint is Antioch (12 of 16), followed by Nicomedia (2) Constantinople (1) and Sirmium (1), the most distant from Yemen.

There are only seven Aksumite coins, also worn and dating from the middle third of fifth century to the early sixth: three of the 5th-century king Ebana⁹, one of king Ousanas II (c.490-510) and three of king Kaleb (c.510 - late 530s). The reverses of coins 21 and 22, issued by Kaleb, seem to be from the same die.

The Aksumite monetary system was tri-metallic, with gold struck for use abroad, with hardly any local circulation, and copper and silver coinage for local needs. The gold coins, unlike most of the silver and copper ones, bore Greek legends, and their weights seem to follow that of the Roman gold *tremissis*, a third of a *solidus*. The overwhelming majority of early Aksumite coins come from Yemen, with only a few from Ethiopia itself¹⁰.

Roman coins in hoards from the southern Red Sea area are often overlooked, but played an important role. The al-Madhāribā hoard, found some 70 km west of Aden, in the Lahej Govenorate, is very similar to the present hoard, although much bigger. It comprised 868 Aksumite gold coins, dating from Ezana (c.325-356) to Kaleb (c.510 - late 530s), and 326 Roman *solidi*, minted between the reigns of Constantius II as Caesar (324-37) and Theodosius II (408-50), most dating from the reign of Constantius as Augustus (337-61)¹¹.

Another example of this combination of late Roman and Aksumite coins is provided by the 31 Aksumite coins (Ezana to Caleb) and 4 Roman *solidi* (3 Constantius II and 1 Valens) acquired in Aden by the Austrian Academy of Sciences in 1898-99¹². Note also the imitation of a *solidus* and a gold coin of Ebana, which were apparently found together some 200-300 miles north of Aden and were shortly thereafter acquired by the British Museum, in 1904¹³.

The hoarding of older foreign gold coins seems to be a characteristic of Aksum: note further a hoard of Kushan coins, dating from c. AD 220, found at a sixth century monastery in Dabra Dammo (Ethiopia)¹⁴.

Historical Circumstances

The international trade of the Roman Empire with Ethiopia, Yemen and India since the first century AD is well documented, ivory being a significant Aksumite export¹⁵.

⁸ We were informed about two further *solidus*, of Constantius II (355-357) minted in Rome (type *RIC* VIII 293) and other of Julian II as Caesar (355-360) minted in Arelate (type *RIC* VIII 239), which may have belonged to our hoard. However, because we are not sure that it does belong to the hoard, and have a photograph only of the second *solidus* obverse, it is not included in our catalogue.

⁹ 'The gold coins of this king are most amply attested by the Yemenite finds' (Hahn-West 2016, p. 13).

¹⁰ Munro-Hay 1985, 1991a, pp. 180-95, 1997, pp. 455-65.

¹¹ Munro-Hay 1989; *RIC* X, p. lxxxix.

¹² Hahn 2000, p. 285; Munro-Hay 1989, p. 87.

¹³ Munro-Hay 1989, p. 84.

¹⁴ Mordini 1960; Berzina 1984.

¹⁵ Warmington 1974; Munro-Hay 1982, id. 1996 (= id. 1991b); Sidebotham 1986, 2011; Harl 1996, pp. 297-312; Young 2011, pp. 24-122; Tomber 2008; Philippson 2009; Seland 2010; Darley 2014; McLaughlin 2014; Mathew 2015; Nappo 2018.

Trajan's Canal, the *Traiános potamós*, linked the Nile to the Red Sea and was still in working order and maintained in Late Antiquity, facilitating Roman seafaring¹⁶.

Roman pottery is found at Aksumite sites, coming from Aqaba and the Eastern Mediterranean¹⁷, and influences and sculptural elements can be recognized in the architecture of Adulis¹⁸. Aksumite coins and pottery have been found in Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine and along the Red Sea¹⁹. Many Aksumite and late Roman coins (even copper) have also been found at archaeological sites in Sri Lanka and India (together in some cases, as in the Karnataka hoard)²⁰. In the early sixth century, Cosmas Indicopleustes remarked on the international acceptability of the solidus even in India²¹.

The thriving Aksumite kingdom invaded Nubia several times in the third and fourth centuries,²² and adopted Christianity as its state religion in 325 or 328, under King Ezana. This monarch received at least one letter from Constantius II, which survives. Ezana rejected this emperor's interference in Axumite matters and his Arian sympathies, but accepted his gifts²³.

In the context of hostilities between the Romans and Persia, Justin I (518-27) and his nephew Justinian I (527-65) established a commercial and military alliance with Aksum against the Persians. After subduing Yemen as a client state in 518, King Kaleb crushed the militant Jewish Himyarite kingdom in 525, aided by a Roman fleet and troops. But he only gained ephemeral control over Yemen; Abreha, an Aksumite general, rebelled in the 530s, defeated the expeditions sent by Kaleb to depose him, and secured his throne by agreeing to pay tribute to the new Ethiopian monarch, Wazeb/Ella Gabaz (c.540-560). Finally, the intervention of Sassanian forces at the behest of South Arabian Jews drew Yemen into the orbit of the Iranian Empire c.570-75²⁴. It has been suggested that the abundant gold issues of Kaleb were used to pay for his overambitious invasion and occupation of Yemen, and his subsequent attempts to recover it²⁵.

The presence of coins issued by Kaleb in our hoard means that it probably dates from the mid-sixth century, coinciding with the collapse of Aksumite rule over Yemen. The high proportion of fourth century *solidi* in the hoard and in the massive al-Madhāribā hoard could be related, firstly, to the accumulation of foreign gold by the Aksumite kings over centuries, thanks to international trade and diplomatic gifts; and secondly, to payments to Roman troops in their campaigns of the sixth century in South Arabia, which required the disbursement of this coin stock and the minting of new coins aligned with Roman metrology.

¹⁶ De Romanis 2002; Cooper 2009.

¹⁷ Williams 2000.

¹⁸ Anfray 1972; id. 1974.

¹⁹ Waage 1952, p. 171, no. 2329; Meshorer-Spaer 1966; Barkay 1981; Bendall 1987; Freeman-Granville 1993; Arslan 1996; Kindler 1998; Hahn 2000, pp. 284-88.

²⁰ Codrington 1924, pp. 31-53; Turner 1989; Turner-Cribb 1991; Krishnamurthy 1994, id. 1999; Boppearachchi 1996; Nawartmal-Nawartmal 1998; Juel-Jensen 1999; Gupta 2004; West 2004; Tomber 2005; Metlich 2006; Day 2011.

²¹ Harl 1996, pp. 290-1, 308-9; Banaji 2016, pp. 127-40.

²² Hatke 2013.

²³ Shahîd 1984, pp. 74-106; Munro-Hay 1991a, pp. 75-85, 202-5; Haas 2008; Bowersock 2012, pp. 63-77.

²⁴ For detailed discussion of these wars, see Munro-Hay 1991a, pp. 85-94; Hatke 2011; Power 2012, pp. 61-75; Bowersock 2012, pp. 1-28, id. 2013, pp. 92-119.

²⁵ Munro-Hay 1991a, p. 183.

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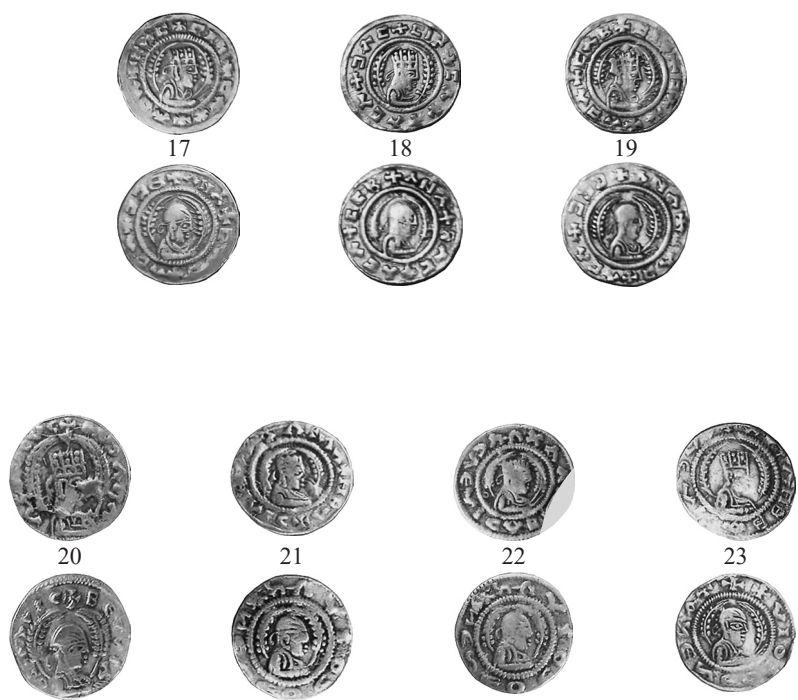
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MARTÍNEZ CHICO AND GONZÁLEZ GARCÍA,
THE ABYAN GOVERNORATE HOARD OF LATE ROMAN *SOLIDI* AND AKSUMITE GOLD COINS (1)

PLATE 48



MARTÍNEZ CHICO AND GONZÁLEZ GARCÍA,
THE ABYAN GOVERNORATE HOARD OF LATE ROMAN *SOLIDI* AND AKSUMITE GOLD COINS (2)

